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Why Old Things Matter

It is, I suggest, unclear whether any old inanimate objects deserve to be treated with respect simply because they are old. Yet this does not entail that an object's age has no bearing at all on the question of how it may permissibly be treated. I defend the claim that those who fail to take seriously the histories of old inanimate objects typically deserve to be criticised on aretaic grounds. Such people, I argue, tend to lack the virtue of humility.

Keywords: respect, age, humility, narrative, inanimate objects, virtue ethics

Many old inanimate objects are thought to deserve respectful treatment. In some instances, this is because they are taken to have a special historical or archaeological significance; in others, because the process of ageing has increased their aesthetic value - by twisting them into baroque and beautiful forms, for example. In other cases, they are thought to deserve respectful treatment because long years of use have worn away their lacquer or in some other way rendered them vulnerable to damage. Indeed, a single old object might be thought to deserve respectful treatment for several reasons: not just because it is, for instance, of historical interest, but also because it is both elegant and fragile.

It is reasonable to think that these sorts of judgements are largely correct and that many old inanimate objects do in fact deserve to be treated with respect. But it is less clear whether any of them deserve such treatment simply because they are old. In fact the suggestion that any of them do might seem very implausible. One can see – the sceptic will contend – why an entity that is *rational* might deserve to be treated with respect simply because it is rational. And although biocentrism is a controversial position, it is not absurd to think that the mere fact that an entity is *alive* marks it out as worthy of respectful treatment. But *age*? It is not at all clear why the mere fact that something has been around for a long time (however we define 'a long time') provides a reason to think it is worthy of respectful treatment.

This scepticism is to an extent justified. For reasons I consider below, the claim that great age *per se* renders an object worthy of respectful treatment is vulnerable to several forceful objections. Yet I contend that these objections do not entail that an object's age has no bearing on the matter of how it may permissibly be treated. On the contrary, I argue that those who fail to take seriously the histories of old inanimate objects typically deserve to be criticised on aretaic grounds. Such people, I suggest, tend to lack the virtue of humility.

1.

Three clarifications:

First, this paper is not about respect for the elderly. My general concern is with the question of how it is appropriate to treat inanimate objects – not just artefacts, such as Roman amphorae and medieval bridges, but natural objects too, such as mountains and stalagmites.

Second, before we can consider whether such objects deserve special treatment simply because they are old, some account must be provided of what an object must be like if

it is to qualify as old. This is no small task, and I will have more to say about the property of oldness below. But for the moment I will assume, if only provisionally, that an object only counts as old if it has existed for more than the usual span of a human life (which, taking technologically developed societies as a model, I take to be seventy years).¹

Third, by *respect* I mean an attitude which has several essential characteristics, of which one is that it is *called for* by an object - ‘commanded, elicited, due, claimed from us’, as Robin S. Dillon puts it.² What is claimed is, first of all, our *attention*. If an object deserves respect then it calls for being taken seriously, for being given appropriate weight in our deliberations. It has a certain sort of importance – though not necessarily a moral importance – that it is in some sense incumbent upon one to acknowledge. In many instances, moreover, this attention can be exhibited in action, which is to say that it is frequently the case that respect-worthy objects deserve to be not merely regarded with respect but also treated with respect. This treatment can take a number of different forms, depending, amongst other things, on the nature of the object, the status of those who have dealings with it, and the context in which those dealings take place. Whereas a priest might exhibit her respect for a sacred artefact by handling it with care, a layperson might express his by staying well clear of the thing, except, maybe, on Holy Days, when the norms of respectful treatment will require him to behave in a subdued manner in its presence. For our purposes, it is important to note that treating an inanimate object with respect tends to preclude using it carelessly. So the woman who respects a certain object will be unlikely to use it as a foot-rest, say, or tap cigarette ash into it. In Western cultures at least, those sorts of actions epitomise disrespectful treatment.³

2.

As Dillon observes:

respect involves believing that there is something about the object, some feature of it or fact about it, that makes it worthy of [special] attention and treatment. This fact or feature is the ground of respect: that in virtue of which it is worthy of respect... [O]ur reason for respecting the object must be that it has, in our judgment, that respect-warranting characteristic...⁴

¹ I concede that this rather arbitrary stipulation has some counterintuitive implications. For instance, it implies that a miraculously vigorous mayfly that lived to see its twentieth birthday would not count as old. But I ask readers to set aside mayfly Methuselahs and other problematic cases for the moment and focus their attention on those objects, such as Egyptian sarcophagi and Roman vases, which both (a) seem intuitively to be old and (b) qualify as old by the lights of my provisional (and admittedly inadequate) definition.

² ‘Respect and Care: Toward Moral Integration, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1) (1992), pp. 105-32, at p. 108.

³ I am therefore referring to a particular variety of what Stephen Darwall called ‘recognition respect’: something similar, perhaps, to the attitude Dillon calls ‘care respect’, which involves ‘cherishing some object, regarding it as having great value and as fragile or calling for special care’. See Darwall, Two Kinds of Respect, *Ethics* 88 (1977), pp. 36-49; Dillon, ‘Respect and Care’, pp. 112, 116.

⁴ Dillon, ‘Respect and Care’, p.109.

Is the property of being old (or, alternatively, the mere fact that something is old) a respect-warranting characteristic? Do old things deserve to be treated with respect simply because they are old?

Geoffrey Cupit, for one, has suggested that they do. Near the end of an interesting discussion of respect for the elderly, he makes the tentative suggestion that such people deserve respect since they are comparatively ‘large’, in the sense of being more extended in time, and large things tend to command our respect, not just on account of their power or other size-related property, but simply because they are large.⁵ After all, he notes, ‘Old trees and forests, old buildings, ancient artifacts, and geological features are often treated as deserving a certain respect on the basis of their age.’⁶ In fact it is, he suggests, plausible that in such cases ‘respect is due to what is old simply because it is old.’⁷

Consider this last statement: the claim that old objects are not just respected but *deserve* respect. Its veracity is difficult to assess. For although we often think that old inanimate objects deserve to be treated with respect, we are in many such cases responding, not to their age *per se*, but merely to some age-related and respect-grounding property that we take them to possess. For example, as noted above, an old inanimate object might be thought to deserve respectful treatment not simply because it is old but because it is fragile or evocative of some historical time period, or because, like vintage wine, its aesthetic qualities have been enhanced by a long period of maturation.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that whether or not old objects actually deserve to be treated with respect because of their age, they are in some cases *thought* to deserve such treatment on account of their age. It follows that even if it is not the case that an old inanimate object deserves to be treated with respect simply because it is old, it could nonetheless deserve some sort of special treatment because certain people think that its age renders it worthy of respectful treatment, and because we are obliged to take these people’s views into account in our dealings with it.⁸ Or put more simply: it may sometimes be the case

⁵ ‘Justice, Age, and Veneration’, *Ethics* 108 (1998), pp. 702-18, at pp. 717-18.

⁶ Cupit, ‘Justice, Age, and Veneration’, p. 717. Hume gives an interesting account of why we respect old objects, though one that I will not address in any detail in this paper. Very briefly, he argues that although we take ancient objects to deserve ‘esteem and admiration’, those attitudes are primarily directed towards the vast span of time that separates us from the object’s origins. On the one hand, this is simply because the vastness of that span of time will arouse in us the ‘sensible delight and pleasure’ we find in contemplating any ‘great and magnificent’ thing. On the other hand, Hume suggests that since the distance separating us from the origins of the ancient object is temporal and not just spatial, contemplating it tends to stretch our imaginative faculties; and he maintains that this, too, creates in us a feeling of admiration for the object, which, again, gets transferred by a process of association onto the object itself. These claims are of course open to question. For one thing, the tendency to experience ‘sensible delight and pleasure’ when contemplating any ‘great and magnificent’ thing does not appear to be universal. Thus for one seventeenth-century commentator, ‘Vast Things differ mightily from those which make an agreeable Impression upon us... Vast Forest put [*sic*] us into a fright; the Sight loses it self [*sic*] in looking over Vast Plains... Rivers too large, Overflowings and Inundations displease us by the Noise and Violence of their Billows, and our Eyes cannot with any Pleasure behold their Vast Extent.’ (Charles de Saint-Évremond, quoted in Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co, 1959), pp. 31-2. See further, David Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 1969 [1739]), Part III, sections 7 and 8.

⁷ Cupit, ‘Justice, Age, and Veneration’, p. 717.)

⁸ I do not say that an object might deserve to be treated with *respect* simply because of the interests certain people take in it, since in such cases it is not clear whether the respect is directed towards the object itself or simply the people who respect it. Be that as it may, it is reasonable to think that an object might deserve some

that we should take special care in our dealings with old things because we should give due consideration to the interests of those people who respect them because of their age.⁹

Even more complications arise when one considers the possibility that some objects deserve to be treated with respect because we have certain obligations to those past individuals who cared about them – their makers, perhaps, or those who preserved them for future generations. For example, one of the many reasons we might resist plans to demolish part of Stonehenge to make room for the amusement rides of Flintstone World would be because implementing such a plan would run counter to the interests of those who hauled the rocks to the site and set them in place, and to all of those people, now mostly long dead, who preserved the site so that it could be enjoyed by us. That, we might think, is why Stonehenge deserves to be treated with respect: not exactly because it is old, but because it meant so much to so many past people.

3.

For these reasons, it is in many cases difficult to assess whether an old object that deserves special treatment deserves to be so treated on account of its age *per se*, or simply because it possesses one or more other age-related properties. In the following, I will not defend the claim that old inanimate objects deserve to be treated with respect simply because they are old. But I will argue that those who fail to take account of the histories of such objects typically lack a certain virtue – namely, humility.

Before presenting this argument, something needs to be said to explain what humility is. It is, indeed, particularly important to do this since the virtue can be conceived in a number of different, sometimes conflicting, ways. Julia Driver construes humility¹⁰ as a disposition unintentionally to underestimate one's self-worth to some limited extent, even in spite of the available evidence. For Iris Murdoch, by contrast, it is a 'selfless respect for reality' and so quite unlike those traits Driver calls virtues of ignorance.¹¹ Others proffer different accounts: for G. F. Schueler humility is a disposition not to care whether other people are impressed by one's achievements; for David Horner a state which 'honors others and esteems them as superior'; for Vance Morgan a tendency 'to believe oneself 'to be beneath others'.'¹²

sort of special treatment simply because certain people think (rightly or wrongly) that it deserves to be treated with respect and because we are obliged to take their views into account.

⁹ Or more controversially: it may sometimes be the case that we should be careful in our dealings with old things because we should give due consideration to the interests of those currently existing people who once respected them because of their age but now do not respect them at all. Or more controversially still: it may sometimes be the case that we should be careful in our dealings with old things because we should give due consideration to the interests of those now-dead people who once respected them because of their age.

¹⁰ She calls it 'modesty'. In the following, I take 'humility' and 'modesty' to be synonymous. See Driver, 'Modesty and Ignorance', *Ethics* 109 (4) (1999), pp. 827-34, at p. 830.

¹¹ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 378; see further, Tony Milligan, 'Murdochian Humility', *Religious Studies* 43 (2) (2007), pp. 217-28, at p. 219.

¹² See G. F. Schueler, 'Why IS Modesty a Virtue?' *Ethics* 109 (4) (1999), pp. 835-41; David Horner, 'What it Takes to be Great: Aristotle and Aquinas on Magnanimity', *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (4) (1998): 415-44, at p. 434; Vance Morgan, 'Humility and the Transcendent', *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (3) (2001), pp. 307-22, at p. 315.

This is just a sample of the numerous accounts that have been offered; I will not try to survey them all.¹³ For present purposes, it will suffice to note that although the nature of humility is widely disputed, there is considerably more agreement about what sorts of actions would be ‘out of character’ for a humble person. All agree that a humble person will not tend to talk about herself excessively, and that she will not be given to boasting. All agree that she will not tend to overestimate her own worth and status, or the worth of her own projects and achievements. Most commentators believe that, being largely unconcerned with such matters, the humble person will not spend much time comparing her own abilities, projects and achievements with those of others.¹⁴

There is general agreement, then, that humility is incompatible with boasting, a preoccupation with self-assessment, etc. The incompatibility, here, is a relation weaker than logical incompatibility. As Aristotle observes, ethics tends to deal with ‘things that are only for the most part true’, and indeed it is not logically impossible for a humble individual to boast, for instance.¹⁵ He might simply be having an ‘off day’; or he might have misread the social situation in which he finds himself. However, the incompatibility in question must be more than mere statistical divergence. It cannot simply be the case that there just so happens to be a negative correlation between humility and actions such as talking excessively about oneself or trumpeting one’s achievements. The relevant relation is, I think, analogous to that which obtains between delivering a religious sermon and uttering profanities. There is no logical incompatibility here. An unorthodox preacher might deliberately swear in order to make a religious point, and even a conservative preacher might stub his toe on the font and, for a moment, forget himself. But it is not the case that preachers just so happen to avoid the use of profanities. Rather, the use of profanities tends to be inappropriate in religious contexts. It is in this sense that the use of such language is incompatible with the delivering of sermons. Similarly, being humble is incompatible with actions such as boasting, trumpeting one’s successes, and so forth.

These actions all involve the overestimation of one’s own worth or status relative to that of one’s peers. Yet one can exhibit a lack of humility in many different ways – not just by thinking oneself superior to one’s peers but (for instance) by overestimating one’s own abilities relative to other sorts of entities, as when a professional wrestler compares his strength to that of a bull or (more hubristically still) a bulldozer. Furthermore, it is possible to exhibit a lack of humility by failing to appreciate the extent to which one’s own achievements depend on factors not of one’s making, such as one’s upbringing, the trailblazing innovations of others, the advice of family and friends, and so forth. In many cases, moreover, the un-humble individual will not merely ignore these sorts of factors: he will also situate himself, his projects and his achievements in some grand narrative; indeed, he may well accord them

¹³ For a useful introduction, see Jeanine Grenberg, *Kant and the Ethics of Humility: A Story of Dependence, Corruption, and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 107-11.

¹⁴ On this point, the views of those (such as Horner and Morgan) who believe that being humble involves having a lowly opinion of oneself must be distinguished from the views of those (such as Murdoch) who construe humility as a kind of selflessness. For those in the latter group, the humble person will neither overestimate nor underestimate her own worth or status, but will, by contrast, be free of the self-centredness that manifests itself in, amongst other things, a concern with such self-estimation.

¹⁵ See *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by W. D. Ross; revised by J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 4 (1094b).

major roles in that narrative. Consider, for example, the historian who concludes his textbook on world history with a long account of the value of his own contributions to intellectual life. Such a man could be humble, but it is unlikely, for the humble man will tend not to overestimate the significance of his projects in ‘the great scheme of things’. He is unlikely to believe that they have much significance on historical, geological or cosmic scales.¹⁶

4.

More would need to be said to prove the point, but grant, for the sake of argument, that humility is indeed a virtue. And grant, further, that the humble person is unlikely to overestimate the significance of his projects in any sufficiently great ‘scheme of things’. It remains to be shown how humility could relate to our dealings with old inanimate objects.

To address this issue, we will need to reflect on a particular case in more detail. So, with the issues of humility and oldness in mind, consider the following true story drawn from the world of mountaineering.

In 1959, Cesare Maestri, an accomplished Italian mountaineer, reported that he and his Austrian climbing partner, Toni Egger, had reached the summit of what had been written off as ‘an impossible mountain’ – Cerro Torre in Patagonia.¹⁷ Many greeted his report with scepticism. Why, it was asked, was the account of his route so vague? And why could no traces of his equipment be found on the upper reaches of the peak?¹⁸ Maestri said that the proof could be found in his companion’s camera, yet Egger had been swept away by an avalanche during their descent, and neither his body nor any of his possessions could be found.

In 1970 Maestri returned to Cerro Torre, determined to silence the sceptics. To this end, he and his team hauled a petrol-powered compressor, weighing more than 300 pounds, up the south-east ridge of the mountain, driving in more than 400 climbing bolts along the way. By using the bolts, Maestri managed to reach the summit and descend safely, though he left the compressor on the mountain, dangling from the highest bolt.¹⁹ His actions were widely condemned. One might be forgiven, critics said, for knocking in a few bolts with a handheld hammer. But there could be no justification for driving in hundreds with a petrol-powered compressor, especially when cracks and other natural hand- and footholds were available.

5.

¹⁶ This is unlikely but not impossible. A world historical individual, in Hegel’s sense, could conceivably be humble even if he were to appreciate the great historical significance of his actions.

¹⁷ Rolando Garibotti, ‘Cerro Torre – “An Impossible Mountain”’, *Alpinist*, 21 February, 2012, <http://www.alpinist.com/doc/web12w/petition-in-favor> [accessed 19 October 2012].

¹⁸ Kelly Cordes, ‘Cerro Torre’s Cold Case’, *National Geographic Adventure*, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/photography/patagonia/cerro-torre-maestri.html> [accessed 19 October 2012].

¹⁹ More precisely, he reached the highest point on the rocky part of the mountain. The ice ‘mushroom’ which tops it was left unclimbed. In Maestri’s view, it was not part of the mountain proper (Jack Geldard, ‘David Lama and Cerro Torre; A Mountain Set Free’, *UKClimbing.com*, <http://www.ukclimbing.com/news/item.php?id=66281> [accessed 19 October 2012]).

Setting aside the vexed question of whether Maestri and Egger really did reach the summit of Cerro Torre in 1959, it seems unlikely to me that a humble person, acting in character, would have acted as Maestri acted in 1970. But how is this impression to be justified? One way to proceed would be to adopt an agent-based conception of virtue ethics, *à la* Michael Slote, and to argue that Maestri's actions were wrong, or in some other way deserving of moral criticism, simply because of the nature of the man's motives. I do not wish to deny that such a strategy could bear fruit. As we will see below, Maestri's motives were not beyond reproach. Moreover, perhaps Robert Sparrow is correct to say that an agent-based approach can be used to shed light on our moral relations to inanimate objects.²⁰ Nevertheless I will not adopt an agent-based approach in what follows. I will argue that in order to explain why a humble person would not be inclined to adopt Maestri-esque climbing methods, one must refer not simply to the motives of climbers, but to *something about Cerro Torre*.

What might this *something* be? It is clear, first, that the humble person would only have had reservations about Maestri's use of the petrol-powered compressor because she took the mountain to be a distinct individual. Such a person would presumably have had no objections to throwing an ordinary lump of coal on the fire, for example, because an ordinary lump of coal is merely a representative of the undifferentiated 'stuff' we call 'coal'. By contrast, Cerro Torre was not simply a mound of rock; it was (and is) something that has a synchronic and diachronic identity, and even a name.²¹

It appears, then, that a humble person could only have had reservations about the use of Maestri-esque climbing methods because she took the mountain to be a distinct individual. Yet the same could of course be said of Maestri. The Italian mountaineer had not travelled to Patagonia to climb any old mountain: his aim was to climb *Cerro Torre*. So if we are to explain how a humble person, *qua* humble, would be disposed to treat Cerro Torre it is not enough merely to note the mountain's apparent individuality.

What other feature could Cerro Torre have possessed that (in the judgement of a humble person) would have rendered it inappropriate to adopt Maestri-esque climbing methods? Plausible candidates are hard to come by. Mountains are not sentient; nor are they alive.²² It could be argued that they are in some sense, and to some extent, natural.²³

²⁰ 'The Ethics of Terraforming', *Environmental Ethics* 21 (3) (1999), pp. 227-45.

²¹ See further, E. J. Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 36-7.

²² True, if millennia were but seconds to us, mountains might *look* alive (cf. Andrew Brennan, 'The Moral Standing of Natural Objects', *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984), pp. 35-56, at pp. 54-5). Viewed on fast-forward, the upsurge of mountain ranges and their subsequent erosion might resemble the growth and decline of fungi and plants. But those appearances would be deceptive, for a moment's reflection reveals that the cases are entirely different. If an entity is alive, then it must be possible for certain effects to be bad or good for it. Even the simplest living things, such as protozoa, can flourish or be harmed. But nothing can be good or bad for mountains. For instance, although it might be bad for climbers or hill-farmers if a certain peak is eroded, it can be neither good nor bad for the mountain itself. Erosion can neither foster nor impede the flourishing of a mountain because a mountain is not the sort of thing that can flourish. Unlike organisms, mountains do not have 'goods' of their own. And even if it were established that mountains do have such goods, further argument would be required to show that humble persons would tend to regard them as deserving any sort of special treatment, simply because they have goods. (To be sure, Christopher Belshaw suggests that destroying any entity, even those which lack goods, is bad for the entity. If this is correct, then destroying a mountain – whatever that might involve – would be bad for the mountain. However, even if destroying a mountain would be bad for the mountain, it would, as Belshaw himself notes, be a further question whether we are morally obliged to refrain from that act of destruction. See Belshaw, *Environmental Philosophy: Reason, Nature and Human Concern* (Chesham: Acumen, 2001), pp. 149-53.)

However, even if it were to be established that Cerro Torre is in some sense natural, and even if writers like Andrew Brennan are correct to say that we have certain obligations to natural objects simply because they are natural – even if these points are granted, it is a further question whether a humble person, *qua* humble, would have judged the mountain to deserve special treatment simply because it is natural.²⁴ Indeed, it is a further question to which the answer is likely to be ‘no’, for it is, on the face of it, difficult to see why a humble person, *qua* humble, would be disposed to regard natural objects as deserving of special treatment simply because they are natural.

Another hypothesis is that the humble person would have judged it inappropriate to use high-impact climbing methods on Cerro Torre because she would have been impressed by the mountain’s great *age*. But although this hypothesis is more plausible than those mooted above, an appeal to age is in itself insufficient to explain the humble person’s response. Suppose that although Cerro Torre has existed for millennia, the particular *form* of the mountain in 1970 was the result of a major geological upheaval in 1969. If that were the case, it is not clear that a humble mountaineer would have had any significant qualms about using Maestri-esque methods to scale the peak. After all – she would have thought – although the mountain has existed for millennia, the rock faces I will need to scale have only existed for a year, so what does it matter if I drive bolts into them?

6.

In order to explain how a humble person, *qua* humble, would be disposed to treat Cerro Torre it is therefore insufficient to refer to the mountain’s apparent individuality, its great age, or to any of the other candidate features discussed in the previous section. In judging it inappropriate to use Maestri-esque methods, the humble person would have been responding to some other feature that she took the mountain to possess.

But *what* feature? One suggestion is that the humble person would have been struck by the role that Cerro Torre played in certain stories or narratives. This is not, I think, an implausible suggestion. On the contrary, the form of the mountain – its near-vertical faces, its spectacular granite spire – clearly embodies certain stories or narratives. In particular, it embodies an immense natural history, involving the slow movements of tectonic plates, the upheaval of land masses and the relentless erosive effects of wind, rain and ice. Some people, indeed, will be able directly to perceive this history in Cerro Torre’s shape. For those with the requisite training, a whole series of geological upheavals will seem to be embodied in the mountain’s form, as an old man’s life is inscribed in the lines of his face.²⁵ But even those of

²³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a thorough account of what it means to be natural. For a good introduction to the relevant issues, see John O’Neill, Alan Holland and Andrew Light (eds.) *Environmental Values* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), Chapter 8.

²⁴ Brennan (‘The Moral Standing of Natural Objects’, p. 41) argues that when an object counts as what he calls a ‘whole natural individual’, rather than an organ, limb, branch, antenna or some other component of such an individual, then the fact that it is natural generates a moral obligation on the part of us moral agents to treat it with respect. The reason for this, he explains, is that whole natural individuals, unlike artefacts (such as hammers) and parts of whole natural individuals (such as livers), are not essentially means to ends and so ought not to be treated as such.

²⁵ See further, Thomas Raab and Robert Frodeman, ‘What is it Like to be a Geologist? A Phenomenology of Geology and its Epistemological Implications’, *Philosophy and Geography* 5 (1) (2002), pp. 69-81.

us who lack this expertise know that the form of any mountain embodies not just a vast human history but an immense nonhuman, geological one as well.

It is clear, then, that the sides of Cerro Torre were the products of millions of years of tectonic and erosive forces. Yet it is also clear that they were transformed in a geological moment by Maestri's overzealous use of bolts. That, it might be said, was Maestri's contribution to the story of Cerro Torre. That was the chapter he wrote.

Although the tone of those remarks is clearly pejorative, I do not want to claim that Maestri's contribution to Cerro Torre's history was for the *worse* – either that it was in some sense bad for the mountain or that it was for some other reason to be regretted. So, for instance, I do not want to say that Cerro Torre had some special value that was diminished when Maestri blasted his compression bolts into it. But I do want to say that Maestri's actions marked a *drastic* turn in the history of the mountain, a sudden and radical departure from what had, up till then, been a slowly-developing story of Cerro Torre's formation and subsequent erosion. Indeed I want to say, further, that Maestri's actions *jarred* with what, until 1970, had been the mountain's history.²⁶

This incongruity would not have been lost on Maestri. He must have known, as the petrol-driven compressor was hauled up the side of Cerro Torre, that his actions were going to mark a decisive moment in the mountain's history. Yet any qualms he might have had about those actions' effects were overridden by other considerations. When asked, in a 1972 interview for *Mountain*, what drove him to climb, he said that 'I wished to use climbing as a way of imposing my personality'.²⁷ And it would seem that a similarly arrogant concern moved him to impose what would become known as the Compressor Route upon Cerro Torre. What really mattered to Maestri was, it would appear, his own story, the one in which he reaches the summit and, returning home, finally silences his critics. ('I will humiliate them,' he wrote, 'and they will feel ashamed for having doubted me.')²⁸ For him, the mountain was little more than a means to that end. His actions in 1970 seem, therefore, to evince a lack of humility. They indicate that he overestimated the importance of his own endeavours in the great scheme of things; that he failed to recognise their insignificance when measured against the immense history embodied in the mountain.

7.

²⁶ Cf. the claim that, when it comes to natural processes, 'Change can be too much or too little, not by any simple quantitative measure, but by a qualitative measure of degree of disruption to narrative significance' (O'Neill et al, *Environmental Values*, p. 157). Note, however, that I am *not* suggesting that to evaluate a course of action one need only note how it affects the relevant narratives (in the following, I argue that one must appeal to aretaic considerations too). Hence my argument is not vulnerable to the criticisms Katie McShane levels at narrative-focused approaches to ethics (see McShane, 'Some Challenges for Narrative Accounts of Value', *Ethics and the Environment* 17 (1) (2012), pp. 45-69).

²⁷ Quoted in the Editors' Note, 'The Restoration of the Impossible', *Alpinist* 20 (summer 2007), <http://www.alpinist.com/doc/ALP20/editors-note-maestri> [accessed 31 January 2013]. Cf. Maestri's response to Walter Bonatti's 1958 ascent of the Col of Hope on Cerro Torre's southern flank: 'Hope is the weapon of the weak, there is only the will to conquer.' Maestri named the col on his side of the mountain the 'Col of Conquest'. See further, Jim Donini, 'Cerro Torre – the Lie and the Desecration', *Climbing*, April 2009, <http://www.climbing.com/route/cerro-torre-the-lie-and-the-desecration/> [accessed 31 January 2013].

²⁸ Quoted in Rolando Garibotti, *Patagonia Online Climbing Guide*, <http://pataclimb.com/climbingareas/chalten/torregroup/torre/compresor.html> [accessed 31 January 2013].

We have been assuming that Cerro Torre is an old object: both that it is old now and that it was already old in 1970. Contrary to the rough and provisional definition I offered at the beginning of the paper, it does not qualify as old simply because it has existed for more than 70 years. Nor does it count as old because it is old for a mountain (it is in fact much younger than many other peaks, such as those in the Laurentian range in eastern Canada). No, one of the reasons Cerro Torre qualifies as old is because it fits into certain *narratives*. And it is these narratives that would be salient for a humble person. It is not clear to me that such a person would necessarily see any value in Cerro Torre.²⁹ However, she would be struck by the fact that the mountain's form had taken such an immense amount of time to develop. And she would recognise that adopting high-impact climbing methods would probably result in a sudden and drastic change to that epic narrative. As a humble person, she would be disinclined to bring about such changes – disinclined, as it were, to put her stamp upon the mountain's history. For this reason, she would be reluctant to emulate Maestri's actions.³⁰

This narrative-based approach does not just apply to our dealings with natural objects such as mountains. Consider ancient artefacts.³¹ In many cases, what will impress itself upon the humble person is not simply the great age of such objects, not simply (to use a strained metaphor) the large number of miles they have on the clock, but the fact that they have managed to *survive* for such a long period of time. Is it not remarkable, the humble person will think, that *this* ancient statue has survived for so long, when so many others were destroyed? And in her judgement, the fact that the object may be associated with such a narrative provides a reason to handle it with care (if, that is, it must be handled at all). It is not necessary that she believe the object to have any significant financial, aesthetic or moral value. Moreover, she might not think that it would mark a *tragic* end to that object's narrative if it were to be broken. But she will recognise that that event would mark a sudden and dramatic turn in that epic story (indeed, it is likely to mark its end) and, as a humble person, she will, all things considered, be reluctant to bring about such drastic changes.

8.

²⁹ It is true that the humble person would tend to regard Cerro Torre as making some moral demands upon her. But it is not clear to me that these demands must be capable of being expressed in terms of the value she sees in the mountain. For a defence of the claim that an object can exert a moral 'pull' upon agents even if it is not valued, see Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 41-8; cf. Katie McShane, 'Neosentimentalism and the valence of attitudes', *Philosophical Studies* (online first), pp. 1-19, at pp. 14-5.

³⁰ It is not clear to me that she would necessarily *respect* the mountain. As noted above, respect is something that is called for by an object. But it is not clear, in the case we are considering, whether a humble person's respect would be for *the mountain*, or simply for *its history* (if any such distinction can legitimately be made). Nevertheless, whether or not a humble woman would deem objects such as Cerro Torre to deserve respectful treatment, she would judge them to be worthy of *special* treatment, and it is for this reason, I would suggest, that she would be reluctant to emulate Maestri's actions.

³¹ Although, in the following, I suggest that an appeal to humility can provide one with reasons to take care in one's dealings with natural objects and artefacts alike, I do not mean to suggest that the two sorts of cases will raise an identical set of issues. On the moral significance of our dealings with ancient artefacts, see Chris Scarre and Geoffrey Scarre, *The Ethics of Archaeology: Philosophical Perspectives on Archaeological Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

To recap: old objects, *qua* old, will typically embody, indicate, or in some other way relate to, certain stories or narratives, and humble persons will take these narratives into consideration in their practical deliberations.³² So, as we saw in the Cerro Torre case, a humble person would, all things being equal, be disinclined to act in ways that would result in a drastic change in the mountain's narrative. For her, such actions would be inappropriate.

These claims need to be qualified in three ways. First, I do not want to go so far as to claim that an object's age *per se* will be of no account at all to a humble person. So, to stick with the example of Cerro Torre, if the mountain's form in 1970 was the result of a geological upheaval one year previously, then a humble climber might have had few qualms about using Maestri-esque methods to climb it. But he might nonetheless have had *some* misgivings – and, moreover, he might have had these misgivings precisely because the mountain – if not its current form – had existed for millennia. The example of the ancient statue can be treated in the same way. If, on the one hand, hundreds of thousands of identical statues had been produced in ancient times, of which most had survived to the present day, then it is not clear that a twenty-first century humble person would be disposed to treat any particular statue with special care. So the shape or 'arc' of the statue's narrative matters. On the other hand, however, it is not clear that a humble person would necessarily have any reason to treat a particular statue with special care if it was the only surviving representative of a batch that was manufactured in 1990. So age would seem to matter as well.

Second, I do not mean to suggest that it will always be *easy* to determine what adopting a humble comportment towards an object would involve. Consider the 'ancient statue' example. It may be unclear whether a humble person would take pains to restore the object to its original state, or whether they would, by contrast, be disposed to leave it alone. Resolving the matter may well require no small measure of practical wisdom.

Moreover – and this is my third qualification – although I have argued that an appeal to humility can furnish one with reasons to desist from treating old inanimate objects in certain ways, I have not claimed that such reasons are overriding. They are not. For example, even if the argument set out above is well taken and an appeal to humility can provide one with a reason not to attempt to restore a certain ancient statue to its original state, that reason need not prove decisive. While a humble person might recognise that there are reasons to leave the statue untouched (or at least to take care if one chooses to restore it), she might judge that the statue ought nonetheless to be restored – because doing so would greatly enhance its aesthetic value, for instance.³³

9.

³² A comprehensive account would provide much more detail about the various forms the relevant relation could take. Developing such an account is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, for a good introduction to the ways that natural objects can relate (e.g., allude, express, embody) to narratives, see David E. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 113-22.

³³ Ronald Sandler makes a similar point with regard to the claim that promoting genetically modified crops betrays a lack of humility. Given the considerable benefits such crops can bring, an appeal to humility need not provide an overriding reason against breeding them. Sandler, 'A Virtue Ethics Perspective on Genetically Modified Crops', in R. Sandler and P. Cafaro (eds.), *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 215-32, at p. 226.

So far, we have restricted our attention to *particular* objects. The reason for this is obvious: when our actions affect objects they tend to affect particular objects, not kinds of objects. If I decide to vandalise a Roman cameo vase, my actions affect that particular vase: they do not affect the kinds denoted by the word 'vase' or the phrase 'Roman cameo vase'. But this is not always the case. Consider, by contrast, the manipulation of genomes. Biotechnology does not just involve the manipulation of particular genomes. In some instances, the guiding aim is to manipulate a kind of genome and by so doing to alter what it means to be an organism of a certain kind.

It would, I think, be interesting to consider whether such actions are vulnerable to the line of criticism developed above.³⁴ One can see how the basic argument would go. It would begin with the observation that the genome of any naturally occurring organism is the result of millions of years of evolution and, as such, embodies a vast natural history. And it would then be argued that a humble biotechnologist would typically be reluctant to alter such genomes in ways that jar with that grand narrative. And this, it would be concluded, can provide an overridable reason against making radical changes to genomes.

There is not enough space, here, to develop that argument. My aim in this paper has been more modest: to show that old inanimate objects typically deserve special treatment, not simply because they are old, but because they tend to embody - or in some other way relate to - narratives that humble people will take seriously in their practical deliberations. That, I have argued, is one reason why we should take care in our dealings with such things as ancient rock formations, Egyptian sarcophagi and Ming vases. That is one reason why such things deserve special treatment.

³⁴ For other humility-based criticisms of biotechnology, see Sparrow, 'The Ethics of Terraforming' and David E. Cooper 'The 'Frankensteinian' Nature of Biotechnology', in eds. A-H. Maehle and J. Geyer-Kordesch, *Historical and Philosophical Perspectives on Biomedical Ethics: From Paternalism to Autonomy?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).